

Echo

COMMENT

Derailing the gravy train...

THE squeeze is finally being put on the most scandalous gravy train in British politics – not MPs' expenses, but local government executive pay. As the coalition government's multi-billion pound deficit reduction programme gets into its stride, local government pay is a prime target. Millions of pounds may be saved. And in the case of executive pay, cuts can be accomplished with no perceptible impact on services. Of course, it shouldn't have taken an economic crisis to prompt such a long-overdue move, but better late than never. For years, this newspaper has highlighted the racket which allows unelected officials in town halls across Essex to fix their own pay and pension deals. Exorbitant was the word we often used. Now local government minister, Essex MP Eric Pickles, has favoured the same term. He has also identified the true nub of the scandal, the percentage increases routinely awarded to those on already huge salaries – regardless of performance, or the meagre amount most Britons' pay has risen. Unfortunately, Essex county councillors still seem not to have taken the hint. While most Essex people's pay has been frozen, the powerful clique of elected members in its cabinet is upping its own allowances by almost a third. Such insensitivity and greed is quite shocking. If the government can also curb councillors' excesses, the taxpayer will back it every pound of the way.

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Tory leader Ball's three big pledges for the district



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■ Back in power
– Tony Ball celebrates his re-election as a councillor
Picture: PAUL WATSON
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TONY Ball has a vision for Basildon. The straight-talking Basildon Council leader is clear about his aspirations for the district and the challenges his council faces in the coming year.

Top of the list are three big pledges – to press for a new health centre in Wickford, to demolish the notorious Royal Court tower blocks in Laindon and finally to clear the district's illegal traveller sites.

Mr Ball was recently elected unopposed for a second term as leader of the ruling Conservative group on the council, after holding his Wickford North seat in the May elections with a 2,507 majority.

He is clear about what he wants to achieve. He explained: "In a nutshell, the key words are clean,



■ Hard hat – Mr Ball hopes plenty of new projects will come to fruition in the next year

- Traveller sites to be cleared at last
- A new health centre for Wickford
- Royal Court towers demolished

green, safe and value-for-money. That is what the residents want."

As a Wickford councillor, one priority was always going to be improving the town centre, following the collapse of the £120million masterplan which was supposed to breathe new life into the area.

The ambitious masterplan promised 700 new homes, a revamped swimming pool and new health centre in the Market Road area.

Mr Ball said: "I was very disappointed we could not manage to secure a deal on Wickford's regeneration, but it was decided, jointly, we would withdraw, as we couldn't come to an agreement with the bidder."

"It is a shame we won't get a comprehensive development." Instead, he said the council was working with NHS South West Essex to, at least, ensure the new health centre gets built.

He added: "I very much hope work will start this year. There will also be High Street pavement improvements."

I'd like to think we'll clear Dale Farm and Hovefields within the next 12 months, with people leaving voluntarily, but I am not pinning my hopes on that

"Things will still happen, but not in the comprehensive way we would have liked. We now have to talk to people separately, when under the comprehensive scheme, it would have all been done together."

A thorny issue of illegal travellers' sites at Crays Hill and at Hovefields, Wickford, has plagued successive council regimes for years, but Mr Ball said he remained hopeful travellers would leave of their own accord, rather than having to be evicted.

He added: "I'd like to think we'll clear Dale Farm and Hovefields within the next 12 months, with people leaving voluntarily, but I am not pinning my hopes on that."

"It's disappointing this just keeps dragging on and on, because those two sites need to be returned to the green belt."

The Royal Court tower blocks – blighted by vandalism and anti-social behaviour – are also high on the council leader's action list.

The blocks could be demolished by the autumn, Mr Ball promised. Work on new replacement homes on a nearby site were now well under way, he said, offering residents the prospect of a move this year.

He said: "Residents have been very supportive and we are looking forward to unpinning the new homes – and blowing up the old tower blocks."

Other projects headed for completion on Mr Ball's watch in Basildon include the £35million sports village in Gloucester Park

next April and new homes on the former Fryerns School site. He also wants to see the town firmly established in the eyes of national businesses as somewhere to trade and create jobs.

Council tax would remain low, he pledged, helped by efficiency

Scrapping housing targets would lift a blight on the district

savings from sharing offices with other public bodies, and improved recycling rates.

He said: "We want to work with other public agencies to get efficiencies on services. Why does each public body have its own building with all those overheads?"

"Why can't they pool their resources to one building, but still deliver the same or a better service for less money? No one should be precious about their own services."

Mr Ball is also keen to establish a base at Pitsea Leisure Centre for the Basildon Arts Collective, to reduce crime and the fear of crime.

And he wants to make sure Prime Minister David Cameron holds to his promise to scrap controversial national house-building targets, which currently threaten local green belt sites.

Mr Ball said: "Scrapping housing targets would lift a blight on the district."